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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ STEALS THE SPOTLIGHT AS LATIN AMERICAN
LEADERS GATHER IN ITALY

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor David D. Pearce, reasons 1.
4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary. Italian PM Silvio Berlusconi delivered our message on consolidating democracy and ensuring respect for human rights to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez during their meeting October 17 in Milan. Chavez was in Italy for the October 17 UN Food and Agriculture Organization's 60th Anniversary ceremony and the October 17-18 Second National Conference on Latin America, organized by the Lombardy regional government and Milan Chamber of Commerce. President Ciampi canceled a planned meeting with Chavez to attend the funeral of an assassinated official in Calabria. Although the Chavez visit grabbed the most headlines, Ciampi and Berlusconi met with heads of state and/or foreign ministers from Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Talks focused mostly on trade and investment, development assistance, and UN reform. End summary.

Chavez meeting comes down to oil and gas

2. (U) Pol M/C and poloff met with DG for Americas Claudio Bisogniero, MFA Vice Director General for the Americas Roberto Spinelli, North America Office Director Francesco Tafuri, and South America Desk Officer Pietro Benassi, October 25 to discuss the series of visits from Latin American heads of state and foreign ministers.

3. (C) Flanked by the CEO of ENI and general manager of ENEL, large Italian energy sector holding companies, Berlusconi met with Chavez at the Milan Chamber of Commerce October 17 for about an hour. Berlusconi opened the meeting noting that Italy was closely following political developments in Caracas and emphasized the need for Venezuelan efforts to consolidate democracy and ensure respect for human rights. Bisogniero, who was present at the meeting, said he "took your line," before the two leaders recognized their political differences and quickly turned to economic matters.

4. (C) The heart of the meeting, according to Bisogniero, was Chavez's briefing on general plans for oil and gas exploration, construction of an oil pipeline in Latin America, and prospects for oil and gas concessions. Chavez also gave Berlusconi a report on the Venezuelan economy, emphasizing Venezuela's 16% GDP growth for last year as a result of high oil prices, poverty reduction; control over inflation, and his policy to use oil revenues to promote social sector programs like health and education. The two leaders also spoke in broad terms about cooperation on tourism, medical assistance, professional training, and infrastructure.

5. (C) Ciampi was scheduled to meet with Chavez as well, but the Italian president canceled in order to attend the funeral of a local official assassinated in the southern province of Calabria. Bisogniero emphasized that Chavez was not in Italy on an official visit, the Berlusconi meeting took place at the chamber of commerce instead of a government building, and no agreements were signed during the visit.

6. (C) Pol M/C praised positive Italian initiatives in the Western Hemisphere like anti-drug trafficking and organized crime cooperation and involvement in the Bolivia Support Group, but expressed U.S. concerns about Chavez. He encouraged Italy to assist with democracy promotion in Venezuela, support civil society and human rights groups, and encourage political party development. He also asked the Italian government to take a lead role in ensuring the success of an EU observer mission for the December 4 legislative elections. Bisogniero agreed that the mission was important and expressed strong Italian support for sending monitors and being actively involved in EU negotiations. He noted, however, that prospects were dim for a big showing by the opposition. When pressed, Italian officials could not recall a public statement by Italy in support of democratic freedoms in Venezuela. They noted that there was no press conference attached to Chavez's meeting with Berlusconi. Bisogniero concluded by assuring us that Italy would continue to monitor political developments in Caracas and would raise Venezuela issues in EU consultations.

Not the only show in town

17. (C) Although media reports tended to focus on Chavez, his meeting with Berlusconi was one in a series of visits of Latin American heads of state and foreign ministers. Placing the Chavez trip in perspective, Bisogniero briefed on nine additional visits October 17-24: Brazilian President Luiz Silva, whose trip was the only one designated as official; Uruguayan President Vazquez; Chilean President Ricardo Lagos; Colombian Foreign Minister Carolina Barco; Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim; Paraguayan Foreign Minister Leila Rachid; Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Derbez; and Chilean Foreign Minister Ignacio Walker.

18. (C) Most of the visitors were already in country for the Latin America meeting in Milan, which Italy plans to continue on a biennial basis. Meetings with Ciampi and Berlusconi focused largely on trade and investment opportunities, development assistance, and UN Security Council reform. Although Bisogniero said it was "wishful thinking" to call the series of meetings part of a broader strategy to increase Italian involvement in the Western Hemisphere, he noted that the region had not received much attention in the past two years because of the focus on Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans. This year brought renewed attention to Latin America, Bisogniero said, which Italy hopes to continue.

19. (C) Comment: Bisogniero's offer to brief Pol M/C came after U/S Dobriansky had earlier raised with MFA our concerns about the Chavez visit. With its significant commercial interests and large Italian population in Venezuela, Italy has a strong motivation to maintain dialogue with Caracas. However, they seem to have gotten our message to keep applying pressure on the democracy issue.
PEARCE